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Indonesia's Regional Elections: Ditching the Direct Vote?

By Dedi Dinarto

SYNOPSIS

Indonesia's newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs has decisively called for a major review of the direct election of regional leaders. While this signals the ministry's growing clout, the institution is likely to involve active military and police officers to fill the impending vacuum in key regional leadership positions from 2022 to 2024. There are challenges ahead.

COMMENTARY

IN NOVEMBER 2019, the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs Tito Karnavian sparked a controversy when he proposed a review of the direct election system for regional leaders such as governors and mayors ahead of the 2020 simultaneous regional elections (*Pilkada Serentak*). Tito claimed that the local elections have proven to be a financial burden to the state. The country has also been prone to political instability, such as in Papua, with direct elections. Tito proposed to have regional heads appointed by the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), or regional parliaments.

Despite the support of the most dominant party, the Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (PDI-P), in the House of Representatives (DPR) or national parliament, President Joko Widodo (a.k.a. Jokowi) was against the idea of indirect regional elections. Claiming himself as a product of the direct regional election system, Jokowi defended the direct vote to uphold democracy by allowing the people to vote for their local leaders. While the debate between Tito and Jokowi indicates the growing clout of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Law No 10/2016 on Direct Regional Elections paves the way for the institution to play a more significant role in shaping Indonesia's regional power structure.

Emerging Power Vacuum

According to the law on Direct Regional Elections, a considerable number of regional leaders who were elected during the 2017 and 2018 simultaneous regional elections must end their terms of office in 2022 and 2023. This is due to the government's effort to create uniformity in the country's election system at all levels in 2024.

These will affect the positions of prominent governors from the most populated and strategic provinces like Anies Baswedan (Jakarta), Ridwan Kamil (West Java), Ganjar Pranowo (Central Java), Khofifah Indar Parawansa (East Java), Edy Rahmayadi (North Sumatra), and Nurdin Abdullah (South Sulawesi). The electoral configuration would also mean that regional and local leaders who are elected in the upcoming 2020 Pilkada can only serve a four-year tenure.

Significant consequences emerge from this electoral reconfiguration. Firstly, these regional leaders could only run again for a second term in 2024, if they are not limited by the two-term tenures. Secondly, the gap would provide time for these regional leaders to manoeuvre should they plan to run for the 2024 presidential election.

In this case, Anies Baswedan, Ridwan Kamil, and Ganjar Pranowo are on the list of potential candidates. More importantly, the law's instruction will result in more than 200 regional and local leadership positions being left vacant.

Power Concentration

Given the situation of having many executive seats vacated, which government institution should fill the void during this 'power vacuum'? According to a spokesperson of the General Election Commission, the Ministry of Home Affairs has the authority to appoint *penjabat kepala daerah sementara* (interim regional or local heads) to run the government until the 2024 general election.

While *pelaksana tugas* (acting executives) are mainly the vice-governor, mayor, or regent due to the temporary absence of the governor, regent, or mayor, *penjabat kepala daerah sementara* includes senior officials or same-rank officials from either the central or provincial governments based on the home ministry's regulation No 1/2018.

Given the huge number of positions to be filled, the Ministry of Home Affairs would potentially look for replacements from institutions with a large supply of manpower, like the military or police, especially with the current '[promotional logjam](#)' issue faced by the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI).

The law theoretically stipulates that both active military and police officers are restricted from involvement in politics or hold any political positions. Yet, how it will be implemented remains to be seen considering that TNI is perceived by the public to be the nation's most trusted institution.

Eventually, this reconfiguration would mean political clout in determining Indonesia's power structure at the regional level shifting — at least for one to two years — to the

hands of the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs Tito Karnavian, the former National Police chief.

Past Experience

In retrospect, the Ministry of Home Affairs was criticised by both academics and NGO activists for its decision to involve police officers as the acting regional chief executives. The then Minister of Home Affairs Tjahjo Kumolo issued the controversial Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No 1/2018 to supersede Regulation No 74/2016, allowing active military or police officers to fill in these positions.

In the past, the Ministry of Home Affairs has indeed assigned an active police general to fill a government position. For instance, Police Commissioner General Mochamad Iriawan was assigned to be the acting governor of West Java for a three-month period in the mid-2018 due to the ongoing regional election. To date, Iriawan remains an active police general. The Ministry of Home Affairs may well repeat the decision during the 'power vacuum' transition.

Challenges Ahead

With the recent development, the Ministry of Home Affairs would potentially play a substantial role in shaping the power structure at the regional level. Such power concentration implies a potential partisanship by what should otherwise be a neutral government institution.

The circumstance will also test Jokowi's credential as the primary leader of the country. Will the president, utilising his prerogative, intervene in favour of civil society protests or opt for a short-term solution? Will this short-term solution expand the reach of huge numbers of active military and police officers in a field considered the traditional preserve of civilian politicians?

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